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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 003918

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TAGS: PREL PARM MNUC PK

SUBJ: POLITICAL OPPOSITION FLAYS NAWAZ FOR DELAYING RESPONSE TO  
INDIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE

REF: (A) ISLAMABAD 3588; (B) ISLAMABAD 3827; (C) ISLAMABAD 3858 (LAHORE 315)

(U) CLASSIFIED BY ACTING POLCOUNS DAN MOZENA. REASON: 1.5(D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: THE PRIME MINISTER'S OPPONENTS SEE NAWAZ SHARIF'S HESITATION IN RESPONDING TO THE INDIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE AS A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE THEIR OWN POLITICAL AGENDAS. PAKISTAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (PPP) LEADER BENAZIR BHUTTO HAS CALLED FOR NAWAZ'S RESIGNATION AND THE FORMATION OF A "NATIONAL GOVERNMENT." THE OPPOSITION COALITION PAKISTANI AWAMI ITTEHAD (PAI) -- OF WHICH THE PPP IS THE LARGEST ELEMENT -- HAS DEMANDED THAT PAKISTAN CONDUCT A NUCLEAR TEST. THE ISLAMIC PARTIES (NOT PART OF THE PAI) ARE THREATENING TO TAKE TO THE STREETS IF THE GOVERNMENT FAILS TO CARRY OUT A NUCLEAR TEST BY MAY 30. IN PRIVATE, HOWEVER, BENAZIR HERSELF (REF C) AS WELL AS THE PPP'S SPOKESMAN AND ONE OF THE PARTY'S SENATORS SEPARATELY TOLD US THEY FEEL THE TIME IS PAST FOR A NUCLEAR TEST IN RESPONSE TO INDIA'S MAY 11 AND 13 BLASTS. DESPITE OPPOSITION ATTEMPTS TO DEPICT HIM AS WEAK AND INDECISIVE, A RECENT GALLUP POLL GIVES NAWAZ A 77 PERCENT APPROVAL RATING ON HIS HANDLING OF THE NUCLEAR CRISIS. END SUMMARY.

PPP SPOKESMAN SEES INDIAN TEST AS "GODSEND"

12. (C) PAKISTAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (PPP) SPOKESMAN FARHATULLAH BABAR TOLD POLOFF MAY 26 THAT INDIA'S NUCLEAR TESTS ON MAY 11 AND MAY 13 WERE A "GODSEND" FOR HIS PARTY'S EFFORTS TO SHAKE NAWAZ SHARIF'S HOLD ON POWER. BABAR SAID THE OPPORTUNITY TO RESPOND TO INDIA'S NUCLEAR TESTS IN KIND HAS NOW BEEN LOST AND IT WAS IMPERATIVE THAT PAKISTAN REASSERT ITS DETERMINATION TO RETAIN ITS NUCLEAR OPTION (WITHOUT CONDUCTING A TEST) AND THAT THE NAWAZ SHARIF GOVERNMENT STEP DOWN AND MAKE WAY FOR A "NATIONAL GOVERNMENT" THAT COULD EFFECTIVELY CONFRONT THE INDIAN MENACE. FOLLOWING A SIMILAR LINE, PPP SENATOR RAZA RABBANI TOLD POLOFF MAY 26 THAT THE TIME FOR PAKISTAN TO RESPOND TO INDIA'S TEST WITH A TEST OF ITS OWN WOULD HAVE BEEN WITHIN 48 TO 72 HOURS AFTER THE INDIAN TESTS. NOW, HE SAID, THE GOVERNMENT HAS DEMONSTRATED ITS WEAKNESS AND INDECISION AND SHOULD STEP ASIDE IN FAVOR OF A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT.

13. (U) THE PPP, THE PAI, AND BHUTTO HERSELF HAVE BEEN SENDING MIXED SIGNALS ON THE ISSUE OF A NUCLEAR TEST. ON MAY 25 BHUTTO TOLD LAHORE PO THAT SHE HAS DROPPED HER CALL FOR PAKISTAN TO CONDUCT ITS OWN NUCLEAR TEST (REF C). BUT ON MAY 27, THE PRESS QUOTES HER AS SAYING THAT "A NUCLEAR TEST BY PAKISTAN IS NECESSARY TO KEEP INDIA AT BAY AND TO REVITALIZE THE STRUGGLE IN KASHMIR." FOLLOWING HER MEETING WITH FOREIGN MINISTER GOHAR AYUB ON MAY 22, BENAZIR SAID SHE WOULD SUPPORT THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT IN THE EVENT OF AN ARMED CONFRONTATION WITH INDIA, BUT THEN REPEATED HER CALL FOR THE FORMATION OF A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT. IN LAHORE ON MAY 24, THE PAKISTAN AWAMI ITTEHAD -- OF WHICH THE PPP IS THE LARGEST COMPONENT -- CALLED FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO RESPOND TO INDIA'S NUCLEAR CHALLENGE BY TESTING A PAKISTANI BOMB, OR TO RESIGN. THE PAI MEETING IN LAHORE WAS ATTENDED BY REPRESENTATIVES FROM 41 POLITICAL PARTIES IN PAKISTAN (MOST OF WHICH HAVE NO ELECTORAL WEIGHT); MINISTER FOR TOURISM SHEIKH RASHID AHMAD ATTENDED TO MAKE THE GOVERNMENT'S CASE. AFTER DENOUNCING THE GOVERNMENT FOR ITS WEAK RESPONSE TO THE INDIAN CHALLENGE, BENAZIR BHUTTO ACCUSED NAWAZ ET AL OF SPENDING THEIR TIME LOOKING FOR WAYS TO VICTIMIZE HER AND HER FAMILY RATHER THAN DEALING WITH THE COUNTRY'S GRAVE SECURITY SITUATION. MAY 28 PRESS ACCOUNTS REPORT THAT PAI PRESIDENT PROFESSOR TAHIRUL QADRI HAS SUPPORTED THE MAY 30 DEADLINE FOR A NUCLEAR TEST SET BY THE ISLAMIST PARTIES (SEE BELOW).

#### ISLAMIC PARTIES DEMAND NUCLEAR TEST

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14. (U) ALL OF THE MAJOR ISLAMIC PARTIES, INCLUDING THE JAMAAT-I-ISLAMI (JI) LED BY QAZI HUSSAIN AHMAD, THE JAMIAT-UL-ULEMAI ISLAM (F)(JUI-F), LED BY MAULANA FAZAL-UR-REHMAN, AND THE FACTION OF THE JAMIAT ULEMA E-PAKISTAN (JUP-N) LED BY MAULANA SHAH AHMED NOORANI HAVE PUBLICLY CALLED FOR A PAKISTANI NUCLEAR TEST. REFLECTING PERHAPS THE LACK OF PUBLIC DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN THE ISSUE, HOWEVER, THE JI'S CALL FOR A NATIONAL STRIKE ON MAY 22 TO PROTEST THE FAILURE TO CONDUCT A TEST WAS LARGELY IGNORED BY SHOPKEEPERS. VARIOUS OTHER PARTIES HAVE CALLED FOR A NATIONWIDE PROTEST CAMPAIGN IF A TEST DOES NOT TAKE PLACE BY MAY 30. IRONICALLY, IN AFGHANISTAN THE TALIBAN GOVERNMENT, WHICH RECEIVES SUPPORT FROM THE JI AND THE JUI-F, HAS ENDORSED PAKISTAN'S RIGHT TO CONDUCT A NUCLEAR TEST, WHILE CALLING UPON IT TO EXERCISE RESTRAINT. MEANWHILE, THE LEADER OF THE PML/N'S COALITION PARTNER, THE SHIIA TEHRIK-E-JAFRIA PAKISTAN (TJP), ALLAMA SAJJID ALI NAQVI, HAS URGED NAWAZ TO REJECT AMERICAN HELP AND TO GO AHEAD WITH A NUCLEAR TEST. IN A REPORT APPEARING IN THE MAY 23 ISSUE OF "THE MUSLIM," NAQVI IS SAID TO BELIEVE THAT PAKISTAN SHOULD NOT MOVE TOWARD THE U.S. AS THIS COULD ENDANGER ITS RELATIONS WITH ITS "TRADITIONAL ALLIES IRAN AND CHINA."

#### DIFFERENCES OVER TACTICS, NOT POLICY

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15. (C) BHUTTO'S CRITICISMS OF THE SHARIF GOVERNMENT HAVE BEEN DIRECTED MORE AT ITS TACTICS IN DEALING WITH THE INDIAN THREAT THAN AT ITS POLICY. HER PUBLIC STATEMENTS WERE ECHOED BY BABAR IN HIS CONVERSATION WITH POLOFF MAY 26. THE PPP'S LINE APPEARS TO BE THAT IF BENAZIR HAD BEEN PRIME MINISTER, THE INDIANS WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS LIKELY TO TEST NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE FIRST PLACE. (BABAR, FOR INSTANCE, CREDITED BENAZIR'S PREEMPTIVE DIPLOMACY IN 1995 WITH HEADING OFF AN INDIAN TEST AT THAT TIME.) SPEAKING AT THE MAY 24 PAI MEETING IN LAHORE, BENAZIR SAID NAWAZ SHARIF'S "GOOD MAN GUJRAL" LINE LAST YEAR HAD BROUGHT PAKISTAN TO "THE BRINK OF DISASTER." ONCE INDIA DETONATED ITS BOMBS, BENAZIR (AND BABAR) SAID SHARIF SHOULD HAVE TAKEN VIGOROUS ACTION TO LINE-UP INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR PAKISTAN AND CONDEMNATION OF INDIA. BABAR TOLD POLOFF THAT SHARIF HIMSELF SHOULD HAVE GONE TO CHINA IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE INDIAN TESTS TO SEEK SUPPORT RATHER THAN SENDING A "LOW-LEVEL" CAREER DIPLOMAT LIKE FOREIGN SECRETARY SHAMSHAD AHMED. SHARIF HAD ALSO FAILED TO RALLY THE MUSLIM WORLD TO PAKISTAN'S SIDE, BABAR SAID, AND HE CLAIMED THAT BENAZIR WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN NAWAZ IN WINNING WESTERN SUPPORT. MEANWHILE, BENAZIR IS CLAIMING CREDIT FOR PAKISTAN'S CAPABILITY OF READYING FOR A TEST IN TWO WEEKS; SHE SAID EARLIER PAKISTAN HAD REQUIRED 30 DAYS TO READY FOR A TEST, BUT SHE HAD CUT THAT BACK.

16. (C) SURPRISINGLY, NEITHER BABAR NOR BENAZIR HERSELF HAS WARNED NAWAZ AGAINST POSSIBLE U.S. ATTEMPTS TO INDUCE RESTRAINT ON NUCLEAR TESTING BY PROMISES OF AID. THE ISLAMIC PARTIES AND MOST OF THE

MAJOR URDU AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS HAVE CAUTIONED NAWAZ TO BEWARE OF AMERICAN BLANDISHMENTS. BENAZIR AND THE PPP, HOWEVER, SEEM WILLING TO WAIT AND SEE WHAT THE U.S. WILL DO IN RETURN FOR PAKISTANI RESTRAINT.

17. (C) COMMENT: POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM -- NOT CONCERNS FOR WHAT IS BEST FOR PAKISTAN -- SEEMS TO BE THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE OPPOSITION'S UNRELENTING ATTACKS ON THE PRIME MINISTER. THE OPPOSITION HAS BEEN IN OVERDRIVE DEPICTING NAWAZ AS INDECISIVE AND WEAK, GIVING HIM NO CREDIT FOR TAKING TIME TO WEIGH CAREFULLY THE IMPLICATIONS OF PAKISTAN'S CONDUCTING (OR NOT CONDUCTING) A NUCLEAR TEST. THE OPPOSITION'S SUCCESS IN TURNING THE PUBLIC AGAINST CONTINUED RESTRAINT REMAINS AN OPEN QUESTION. A JUST-RELEASED GALLUP POLL, FOR EXAMPLE, REPORTS THAT OVER TWO-THIRDS OF RESPONDENTS FAVORED A PAK NUCLEAR TEST, BUT "IN RESPONSE TO FRIENDLY ADVICE" TO EXERCISE RESTRAINT, NEARLY 60 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WOULD THEN FAVOR CONTINUED RESTRAINT. 77 PERCENT WERE "SATISFIED" WITH HOW NAWAZ SHARIF HAS HANDLED THE SITUATION. (SEPTEL PROVIDES MORE DETAILED ASSESSMENT OF THE POLL.)

SIMONS